

SLAVE, FRIEND, AND LOVER

The Conversion of Saint Francis

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OUTLINE

Thesis Statement: "I no longer call you slaves, for a master doesn't confide in his slaves; now you are my friends."

*not precisely
a thesis statement
for your paper—
although the
verse is a fine
epigraph.*

I. Slave

- A. Dark Ages Philosophy
- B. Food and Drink
- C. Warrior

II. Friend

- A. Star Gazing
- B. Begger Chasing
- C. Leper Kissing

III. Lover

- A. Mammon...
- B. Our Father...
- C. Take No Thought...

I no longer call you slaves, for a master doesn't confide in his slaves; now you are my friends, proved by the fact that I have told you everything the Father told me.¹

A dark grey cloud was beginning to release its grip from the continent of Europe. Across the hills and valleys the morning sun glistened upon the cool drops of moisture left by the passing cloud. The dampened fields absorbed both sun and moisture in the hopes of growth and new life.

Upon its rocky perch the village of Assisi was feeling the final drizzle of the receding cloud. To the villagers the receding cloud of the Dark Ages meant a chance for prosperity and a chance for newness of life.²

Nonetheless, imprisoned by their own philosophy of God and their own caste system, the people moaned under the weight of medieval obedience. By the end of the Dark Ages paganism had, for the most part, ceased to exist in Europe; but the carnage of injustice and inequality among men still stank heavily upon the soil.³ Truly the Church had made many efforts to meet the needs of the people by reforming her clerics and ministers; but what the people really needed was compassion -- to know that someone cared.

Because the clergy lived detached from the people in massive cathedrals or in secluded monasteries, the serfs and peasants were left without a realistic example to follow. They saw the priests and bishops in their brightly colored vestments performing the office of their vocation. So therefore, God was seen in much the same light: as a lord or taskmaster to be revered at a distance. The idea of God as being a personal Father and lover of mankind was totally foreign to them.⁴ It took a lover like Saint Francis to portray to the people, through his life example, the ^{simple} simplistic desire that God has for them to see him as their Father and their lover.

But even in St. Francis it was necessary for a change of heart to take

place. For St. Francis was not always St. Francis. He too needed to realize that God has a desire to have fellowship with his creation.

Until he was about twenty-four St. Francis was Francesco Bernardone, son of Pietro Bernardone, a cloth merchant in Assisi.⁵ Francis was known to be extravagant in the way he spent money.⁶ In his clothing he was almost bizarre. He would sew worthless pieces of rags and the finest fabrics together into a patch-work cloak.⁷ He was known to eat the finest foods. He was partial to poultry; so after his conversion he had his companions lead him, using a rope tied around his neck, through the streets of Assisi, saying, "See the man who fattened on chickens!"⁸ His kingly customs moved his mother to say, "He is more like a prince than our son."⁹ This princely merchant's son later told a friend how devoid of love he used to be, "I turned away beggars asking alms for the love of God, when I would assuredly have listened to them had they asked in the name of a great count or baron."¹⁰

Among his desires was the desire to be a famous knight or warrior. Assisi was always in a perpetual state of war with neighboring villages. And in one such a skirmish with the neighboring town of Perugia Francis was taken prisoner. He spent a year in prison during which he is quoted as repeatedly boasting, "I shall be a great man."¹¹ After returning from his captivity he made plans to go with Count Gentile da Fabriano, a mercenary in Assisi's previous wars, to fight in Apulia. While the project was developing in his mind he met a "certain soldier of honor and courage, but poor and vilely clad."^{footnote} A sense of brotherhood for this old man-at-arm, which his newborn military ardor naturally inspired, moved Francis to give his own expensive clothes to the old warrior. Legend tells us that because of this act of charity Francis was given an interesting dream that night. He beheld an impressive room filled with every kind of weapon of war imaginable; each weapon having the sign of the cross on it. He then heard a voice say, "All

these are for thee and for thy soldiers." ^{footnote} Little did Francis realize the spiritual significance in this dream.

Providing for himself a horse and a coat of mail he ^{SP} galantly road off to war; only to fall ill in Spoleto. While he thus lay he again heard a voice, as if it were in a dream, saying, "Francis, whom does it profit most to follow, the master or the servant?" The startled man replied, "The master." "Why then," asked the voice, "do you leave the master for the servant, the prince for his subject?" The guilt-ridden Francis pleaded, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The voice replied, "Return to thy country, and then it will be told thee what thou must do."¹²

T.S.R. Boase in his book St. Francis of Assisi wrote that St. Francis' "conversion was, however, no sudden one. Francis," Boase continues, "was not of those, such as Paul or Augustine, who find in some supernatural event the cataclysmic realization of a change of heart."¹³ ^{correct} Mr. Boase is true in saying that Francis' conversion was not of the same nature as that of Paul or Augustin; he hadn't persecuted the christians and then suddenly turned around and confessed Jesus as the Son of God. Rather, as time went by he began to feel more and more the compassionate voice of God. His conversion or submission to Christ came step by step.

One evening while out revelling with his friends, he was caught idly gazing at the stars. "What are you thinking of; why do you not come with us?" asked one of his friends. "Perhaps you're thinking of taking a wife," another retorted. "You speak true," Francis replied solemnly, "a bride nobler and richer and fairer than you have ever seen." The legend of the Three Companions tells us, "But this he said not of himself but of God, for his bride was true religion."¹⁴ Slowly the veil of his old nature was being removed, the vision of his loving Father seen.

G.K. Chesterton tells a story, in his book on St. Francis, of how while Francis was selling velvet and fine embroideries in the market place he encountered a certain begger. Francis was busy selling fabric to a respectable merchant when this begger ^{SP}approached him and, being totally devoid of tack, asked for alms. With two conversations going on at once Francis was torn between the two worlds of helping a brother in need and being successful in business. A battle that was already going on in his heart -- to do what is right in the sight of the world or to do what he feels is right in the sight of God -- was only emphasized by this encounter. Francis managed to ward off the begger in order to complete his transaction with the merchant. Once having completed his business with the merchant he turned to offer the begger alms, only to find him gone. Urgency entered Francis' heart as he abandoned his booth to look for the mandecant. Finding him, Francis unloaded the unexpected mammon on the begger. Turning from this incident Francis swore before God that never in all of his life would he refuse to help a poor man.¹⁵ Slowly that old carnal nature was being striped away.

In the beginning of St. Francis' Testament, Francis writes:

When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world.¹⁶

For Francis the hardest brothers for him to love were the lepers. But as his heart wandered about seeking satisfaction he knew that this prejudice had to be overcome. So one day as he was riding across the valley he met a poor leper. The moment for an act of self-conquest had come. He dismounted from his horse, kissed the hand of the poor wretch, and filled it with money.¹⁷

After that I did not wait long before leaving the world.¹⁶

Francis began to spend more and more time thinking of "taking a wife." His life began to be spent not only on acts of charity but also on meditation --- deep meditation on God and the mystery of redemption. Reverend Baring-Gould says that at this point in his life Francis had "found what he desired, and it was more than he had dreamed of. The Gospel narrative pondered over by Francis was so real, that he longed to follow every step of the Life of Lives."¹⁸ St. Bonaventura wrote:

Jesus Christ crucified reposed continually in the breast of Francis like a banquet of myrrh, and the fire of love with which he burned made him desire to be entirely transformed into Jesus.¹⁹

He began to see God as a lover.

While praying in the little chapel of St. Damian before an image of the crucified, Francis heard the image say, "Francis, seest thou not that my house is in ruins? Go, and restore it for me." "With good will, Lord," was Francis' response. Like an eager youngster, Francis hurried off to repair the crumbling little chapel. In his zeal, however, he failed to realize that God was speaking about the Catholic Church and not just the crumbling little building that housed the chapel. Francis still was in need of seeing God as a lover and a partner and not as a divine taskmaster.

Running to his father's warehouse and taking several bales of cloth, Francis went to Foligno and there sold them, together with the horse that had brought them there. It was a smiling Francis that delivered the money raised for rebuilding the small chapel to the surprised priest. But it was a repentant Francis that heard the priest tell him that he could not take the money because the fabric was not Francis' to sell. Realizing that his

father was not going to be all that happy with ^{his} ~~him~~ ^{the} selling his fabric, Francis sought refuge with the priest.

Francis' exile lasted for only a short time. He soon decided to return to his father's house. As he entered Assisi he was met with the pelting of stones and shouts of derision. The man that had boasted of becoming famous got his wish, but for the wrong reasons. Rather than acting like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, ^(Luke 15:20) Pietro Bernardone took hold of his son, had him bound and cast him into a dark prison.²⁰ A few days later, Bernardone left on a business trip. Francis' mother then crept to her "prince," loosened his chains, unbarred the door, and bade him depart.²¹ One by one the shadows of his former existence began to dissipate. ^{SP} It seemed like a long time since had been a P.O.W. in a Perugian prison. In that time he had grown to realize the simplistic love that God had for him; and how it is much greater to be clothed in the righteousness of Jesus than in the best of satins; and how it is far superior to taste of the good word of the Lord than of the savory thighs of a turkey. The passionate love of his crucified Savior was what St. Francis set his mind on sharing. And now he was prepared to defend himself.

When Pietro returned and found his son gone he appealed to the magistrates to recover his son and his money. But to this Francis retorted that he was no longer under their jurisdiction, seeing that he was now a servant of God. Pietro then pleaded for ~~a~~ audience with the bishop. To this demand Francis was obedient.

When they finally met before the bishop, Pietro not only demanded that his money be restored but also a public renunciation of all claim to any share of the family property by Francis. The bishop exhorted Francis to restore the money by saying, "Give it back to him, for whatever is acquired

by unjust means, God refuses to accept. Therefore, my son, have faith in God, and act like a man."²² These words soothed and encouraged the youth, who therefore said, "Not only the money, but everything that can be called his, even the clothes he gave me, I will restore." Having said thus Francis removed his fine apparel and handing both the clothes and money to Pietro, he cried, "Bear witness all present, I have restored to Pietro Bernadone all that was his. Up to this time I have called him my father, I call him so no more. God alone is now my father." *footnote*

The bishop threw his mantle over Francis' naked shoulders, and tenderly embraced him. And a scene so strange and so touching moved every heart. But Pietro, still indignant and full of bitterness, walked home with the remnants of his son. Francis on the other hand, clothed in a rough laborer's frock left Assisi for snow-covered fields singing in French the praises of God.²³

Francis returned to St. Damian to live and to repair the decaying edifice. For the next two years he devoted his time toward rebuilding old churches and helping the lepers. In that time he restored three churches: St. Damian, a church of St. Peter, and that of St. Maria degli Angeli, at the Portuncula, which became from that time his home.

During the two years it seems that it had never occurred to Francis to make himself a monk of any of the existing orders. Rather, he lived alone, free to follow his own devices.

However, in 1208 as he sat listening to mass in his favorite church, the Portiuncula, something about the gospel of the day struck him. After mass he begged the priest to expound it to him. These were the words which touched his heart:

Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in
your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats,

neither shoes, nor yet staves. And as ye go, preach,
 saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' ()

"Here is what I have wanted," said Francis, "here is what I have long sought." *postlude.* Leaving the church he instantaneously discarded his shoes, his staff, and the leather girdle about his waist, replacing the girdle about with a small piece of cord. This message to his soul revealed to it an object, gave it a purpose, for which it had sought during the years of probation. His mouth was opened to preach the good news of his benevolent Father and his glorious Son to the poor. He went forth out of the little chapel of the Portiuncula on St. Barnabas day in 1208 as a preacher, and thus, unaware, began a mission which was to move whole kingdoms, and touch a multitude of lives with the love of God.²⁴

As the sun left the sky a silhouette could be seen crossing the dampened fields. Up against the reddened horizon the ragged man was hurling seeds into a multitude of furrows and sing in French.

FOOTNOTES

¹John 15:15.

²T.S.R. Boase, St. Francis of Assisi (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 17.

³G.K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1924), p. 36.

⁴Ibid., p. 44-51.

⁵Boase, p. 70, 80.

⁶Chesterton. p. 55.

⁷Boase, p. 12.

⁸Rev. S. Baring-Gould, M.A., "St. Francis of Assisi" ⁱⁿ The Lives' of the Saints (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1914), XI, 70.

⁹Chesterton, p. 55.

¹⁰Boase, p. 27.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Baring-Gould, p. 71-72.

¹³Ibid., p.26.

¹⁴Boase, p. 12.

¹⁵Chesterton, p.55-58.

¹⁶Placid Hermann, O.F.M., ed., The Writings of Saint Francis , tr. Benen Fahy, O.F.M. (Chicago 9, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1944), p. 67.

¹⁷Baring-Gould, p.73.

¹⁸Ibid., p.74.

¹⁹Hermann, p.8.

²⁰Luke 15:20.

²¹Baring-Gould, p.75-77.

²²Ibid., p.78.

²³Ibid., p.77-79

*Better to this kind of reference in your text,
in parentheses, immediately after mention
of the scripture passage*

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

²⁴Ibid., p.80-81.

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Format	.4
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Development (Ideas)	
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